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Tribe seeks restrictive liquor permit

Sycuan trying again after 1993 rejection

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SACRAMENTO – Reopening what promises to be a noisy debate, the Sycuan band of El Cajon has applied for a state license to serve liquor at its remote casino in the Dehesa Valley.

The tribe, which operates the only Indian casino in San Diego County that cannot serve alcoholic drinks, has proposed a number of conditions on its license to allay fears of drunken gamblers on the winding, two-lane road to its busy gambling complex.

“Our application strikes a delicate balance between the wishes of our customers and the need to assure the public safety,” said Adam Day, Sycuan's assistant tribal manager. “I think you will find it is unprecedented. We have asked the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control to impose a number of conditions and requirements.”

Sycuan is asking the state agency to reverse its denial 15 years ago of the tribe's initial request for a liquor license.

This time around, the tribe has agreed to restrict liquor sales and consumption to its buffet and cafe lounge, two high-roller rooms and the casino's theater. No drinks would be permitted on the gaming floor.

Drinking hours also would be limited at Sycuan. Last call would be at 1:30 a.m. in the high-roller rooms and the cafe lounge, and earlier in the other locations.

The tribe also has committed to training its staff to recognize those who may have had too much to drink, and to connect them with transit options the casino already provides to gamblers who arrive there intoxicated, Day said.

“We're asking for much stricter limits on ourselves (than) other similarly situated establishments,” he said.

Nonetheless, the proposal has alarmed local residents, who have been frustrated for years with the traffic the casino has drawn to Dehesa Road.

“We have 15,000 cars a day down our rural road and now they're going to put people in those cars who have been drinking?” said Pat Riggs, president of the Dehesa Valley Community Council. “We have a lot of accidents now. ... It would be a disaster for the community.”

San Diego County Supervisor Dianne Jacob, who represents the area, said she will oppose the application.

In addition to the conditions the tribe has proposed, Sycuan has contributed more than \$2 million to make local roads safer. But those improvements have done little to address safety concerns associated with the roads' capacity, Jacob said.

“Adding liquor just compounds an already bad situation on dangerous roads,” Jacob said. “This is a huge public safety issue.

“I understand the tribe's needs, but I think the bigger need here is respect for the safety of the people who travel that road.”

Local officials and residents have 90 days to comment on the application, which was filed on July 15.

The nearby Viejas Casino in Alpine was the first of the county's Indian casinos to secure a liquor license in 1992. Sycuan's bid was denied in the face of stiff local opposition a year later.

The Barona Resort & Casino near Lakeside, which is accessed via another curvy two-lane road, was forced to accept restrictions that limited liquor sales to golfers, hotel guests, gamblers in two VIP rooms, an events center and a steakhouse.

Liquor licenses for most of the other local casinos, however, have not been controversial. Sales and consumption are permitted on the gaming floors and throughout casinos operated by Pala, Rincon, Pauma, San Pasqual, Santa Ysabel, La Posta and Campo, the ABC spokesman said.

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